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Edited by A. A. DI CASTRO and D. TEMPLEMAN



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CHRIS CLARK

NIBBĀNA AS THE FRUIT OF MERITORIOUS DEEDS IN THE APADĀNA¹

TWO PAIRS OF ETHICAL TERMS IN THE PĀLI CANON

In the canonical literature of Theravāda Buddhism there are numerous passages in which the Buddha urges his followers to realise *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāna*) by practising the eightfold path (e.g. S V 420–424)² or by some other means (e.g. S IV 359–361). Elsewhere in the Pāli canon, the Buddha encourages his followers to gain a good rebirth by performing meritorious deeds such as giving (e.g. A III 32–34). As is well known, the process behind the latter is the workings of *karma*, or action, in which a meritorious deed ripens into a pleasant karmic fruit, while a bad deed ripens into an unpleasant fruit.

A study of such passages indicates the existence of two important pairs of ethical terms (Premasiri 1976). The first consists of what is wholesome (*kusala*) and what is unwholesome (*akusala*) and is often employed in passages dealing with *nibbāna*. The second consists of what is meritorious

¹ I would like to thank Mark Allon and David Templeman for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

² In this paper, the abbreviations and system of citing Pāli texts are as per Cone (2001).

(*puñña*) and what is bad (*pāpa*) and is often used in passages dealing with *karma* and rebirth. The first pair provided a useful set of vocabulary to label what was considered to lead to *nibbāna* as wholesome and what was considered to lead away from *nibbāna* as unwholesome. On the other hand, the vocabulary of the second pair was used to label what was considered to result in pleasant karmic fruit as meritorious and what was considered to result in unpleasant karmic fruit as bad.

An important clarification must be made: These two pairs of ethical terms are not used to describe two distinct sets of practices (Keown 1992:122–123).³ For example, virtuous conduct is an important component of the eightfold path leading to *nibbāna* (M I 301). However at A IV 241–243 it is also stated that virtuous conduct makes merit and results in a good rebirth. Another example concerns two almost identical sets of action, that is, the first four wholesome paths of action (e.g. D III 269) and the first four factors in the *uposatha* observance (e.g. A IV 248–251).⁴ At A V 57–58 it is stated that one who cultivates the wholesome paths of action puts an end to suffering (i.e. realises *nibbāna*). On the other hand, the *uposatha* observance is described as a meritorious deed which yields great fruit and results in a good rebirth (A IV 251–255). Therefore some actions are capable of generating merit and also leading their performer towards *nibbāna*.

This paper, offered in honour of Giuseppe Tucci,⁵ is concerned with a number of key passages from the Pāli canon which do not conform to the trends described thus far.

A PASSAGE FROM THE KHUDDAKAPĀṬHA

The first of these passages was highlighted by McDermott (1973). It comes from the *Nidhikaṇḍasutta*⁶ in the *Khuddakapāṭha* in which two

³ For a more general discussion on this topic, see Aronson (1979).

⁴ The difference being that in the wholesome paths of action there is abstention from misconduct in regard to sensual pleasures, while in the *uposatha* observance there is abstention from sexual activity.

⁵ While Theravāda Buddhism was not among Tucci's primary research interests, it is reported that besides his well known expertise in Sanskrit and Tibetan, Tucci had "more than working knowledge" of Pāli (Majumdar 2002:36).

⁶ Kv 351.18–21 quotes a parallel to verse nine of the *Nidhikaṇḍasutta* (Khp 8.9). As noted by Jayawickrama (Kv-a xxiv), it appears that the author of Kv-a regarded this verse

types of treasure are contrasted. The first is the material type buried deep underground for a future need. The text states that such a treasure is eventually shifted or stolen. The second is merit,⁷ which we might regard as a form of spiritual currency generated by the performance of meritorious deeds, for example, “by means of giving, virtuous conduct, restraint and taming”⁸ (*dānena sīlena saṃyamena damena ca*, Khp 8.6). The *sutta* attempts to demonstrate that this is the superior type of treasure, stating it is well buried (*sunihita*, Khp 8.6, 8.8) and not to be taken away (*ajeyya*, Khp 8.8). A list is then provided of what may be gained as a result of this second type of treasure:

*mānusikā⁹ ca sampatti devaloke ca yā rati
yā ca nibbānasampatti sabbam etena labbhati.*

The attainment of being a human, pleasure in the world of the gods and the attainment of *nibbāna*; all that is gained by means of this [merit].

*mittasampadam āgamma yoniso va¹⁰ payuñjato
vijjāvimuttivasībhāvo sabbam etena labbhati.*

Mastery of the knowledges and liberation for one properly applying himself on account of the attainment of friends; all that is gained by means of this [merit].

as coming from a source outside of the Theravāda tradition, stating, “(This) *sutta* is presented (here) after taking it from an opponent’s doctrine” (*suttaṃ parasamayato āharitvā dassitaṃ*, Kv-a 100.11). It is also notable that the Nidhikaṇḍasutta is the only section of the Khuddakapāṭha without parallel in the Pāli canon (von Hinüber 1996:44). While it is therefore possible that the unusual ideas expressed in this *sutta* may originate from non-Theravādins, without further evidence this idea remains speculative.

⁷ While the commentary of this text explicitly labels the second type of treasure as merit (e.g. Pj I 221.21), the *sutta* does not do so unambiguously. However Khp 8.9, 8.16 strongly support such an association.

⁸ In this paper all translations are my own.

⁹ B^c *mānussikā*. While short Pāli passages quoted in this paper use the Pali Text Society reading, whole Pāli verses are based upon the readings of three editions: the Chaṭṭhasaṅgī Piṭaka Series in Burmese script (prints from 2006–2008), hereafter cited as B^c; the Buddhajayantī Tripiṭaka Series in Sinhala script, hereafter cited as C^c; and the Pali Text Society edition in Roman script, hereafter cited as E^c. Minor orthographic variants and variants judged to be incorrect from a grammatical or orthographic standpoint have been omitted. Other variants are listed after their abbreviated source, as above.

¹⁰ C^c *ca*, E^c *ve*.

paṭisambhidā vimokkhā ca yā ca sāvakaṭṭhāramī

paccekabodhi buddhabhūmi sabbam etena labbhati. (Khp 8.13–15)

The analytical insights, the liberations, the perfection of a disciple, the awakening of a *paccekabuddha* and the ground of a *buddha*; all that is gained by means of this [merit].

In light of the introduction to this paper, it should not be surprising that actions capable of generating merit might also lead their performer to *nibbāna*. What is surprising however is that here *nibbāna* is incorporated into the vocabulary set of merit and *karma*, and that, doctrinally, the attainment of *nibbāna* and even buddhahood is presented as the result of merit. McDermott (1973:345) states that this is “the lone clear canonical expression of the view that *Nibbāna* is simply the reward for the most meritorious of *kamma*”. However this is not correct. There are many similar passages found in a little-researched canonical text called the *Apadāna*.¹¹

PASSAGES FROM THE APADĀNA

The *Apadāna* consists of a collection of stories in verse, the great majority of which are hagiographies of monks and nuns. The current Pali Text Society edition of this work (Lilley 1925–1927) is not reliable and perhaps partly for this reason, in contrast to almost all other Pāli canonical texts, a complete English translation of the *Apadāna* has not yet been published.¹² While it is therefore not particularly surprising that this work has not received a great deal of scholarly interest, it is nonetheless unfortunate given its numerous points of interest which warrant detailed research. The present paper is a preliminary investigation into just one of these areas.

¹¹ In addition, Egge (2002:81–82) has highlighted two passages from the *Vimānavatthu* in which the protagonist hopes that awakening will be the fruit of a meritorious deed (Vv 37.13, 81.24). An analysis of these passages is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² As part of my doctoral research, I am currently preparing an edition, translation and study of a portion of the *Therāpadāna*, the third and largest section of the *Apadāna*.

The Apadāna persistently employs the concepts and vocabulary of merit and *karma* in its narratives, describing that appropriately performed meritorious deeds yield very pleasant fruits, even after immense intervening periods of time. By way of example, one story narrates that 94 aeons ago a man makes a footstool for Siddhattha Buddha. The karmic fruit of this action is the subsequent ownership of a collection of shoes made from various precious materials:

*soṇṇamayā rūpimayā phalikāveḷuriyāmayā
pādukā abhirūhāmi pādapīṭhass' idaṃ phalaṃ.*

I stepped into shoes made of gold, made of silver, made of crystal and lapis lazuli; this is the fruit of [making] the footstool.¹³

*catunavute¹⁴ ito kappe yaṃ kammam akariṃ tadā
duggatiṃ nābhijānāmi puññakammass' idaṃ phalaṃ.* (Ap 55.17–20)

During the ninety four aeon[s] since I performed the deed at that time, I am not aware of [having been reborn in] a bad transition; this is the fruit of the meritorious deed.

When compared with most canonical material, there is nothing particularly unexpected about this passage. Indeed, it is true that in some of its narrative, the way in which the Apadāna treats *nibbāna* is also rather conventional. For example, there are stories which describe the protagonist realising *nibbāna* after understanding all the taints (Ap 61.24), while cultivating the perception of impermanence (Ap 65.4) and after practising with exertion in a grove inhabited by tigers (Ap 66.11–12). What is of particular interest, however, are the numerous passages in which *nibbāna* is treated less conventionally by being listed as one of the possible karmic fruits of a meritorious deed. A small selection of these passages has been made with the intention of demonstrating the variety of different ways in which this idea is expressed.

¹³ The protagonist, Sihāsanadāyaka (Donor of a lion throne), also makes a lion throne for Siddhattha Buddha, a deed which yields a separate fruit (Ap 55.15–16).

¹⁴ B^e *catunnavut'*.

The first such passage is part of a rather long story which begins 100,000 aeons ago with a wealthy man deciding to make a donation to Padumuttara Buddha and his monastic order. Following the meritorious deed (*puññakamma*, Ap 307.16), when the narrative eventually reaches the final life of the protagonist, he states:

*satasahasse kataṃ kammaṃ phalaṃ dassesi me idha
sumutto saravego va¹⁵ kilese jhāpayī mama.*

The deed [I] performed one hundred thousand [aeons ago] produced a fruit for me in this life: as if with the speed of a well-released arrow,¹⁶ it burnt my defilements.

*aho me sukataṃ kammaṃ puññakkhette anuttare
yattha kāraṃ karitvāna patto 'mhi acalaṃ padaṃ. (Ap 307.25–28)*

Ah, the deed was well-performed by me to an unsurpassed field of merit in that, having performed the deed of homage, I attained the unshakable state.

The word *nibbāna* is not used in these two verses, nor is it used in most of the passages examined in the remainder this paper. Pāli texts commonly refer to *nibbāna* by employing one of its many poetic adjectives¹⁷ or by evoking one of its defining features. This passage does both. One of the terms used to describe *nibbāna* realised in life, as opposed to *nibbāna* coinciding with death, is the “quenching of the defilements” (*kilesaparinnibbāna*, Nyanatiloka 2007, s.v. *nibbāna*). It is likely the first verse cited here refers to this process. The second verse contains the expression the “unshakable state” (*acalaṃ padaṃ*), which is almost certainly being used as a synonym of *nibbāna*. Indeed, this phrase follows and qualifies the word *nibbāna* in an earlier verse in the Apadāna (Ap 23.23). These two verses strongly suggest that making a donation to a past *buddha* and his monastic order was the reason that the protagonist realised *nibbāna*.

¹⁵ E° *ca*.

¹⁶ Particularly in light of Ap 29.16, 280.18, this translation seems preferable to “[I] was well-released (i.e. awakened), as if with the speed of an arrow”.

¹⁷ For some examples, see Norman (2008:137).

The story from which the second passage comes also begins 100.000 aeons ago and describes a brahman leaving his ten children to live in a hermitage in the forest. There, he meets Padumuttara Buddha and gives some fruit to him and his monastic order. Following the meritorious deed (*puññakamma*, Ap 452.19), he states towards the end of the story:

*sududdasaṃ sunipuṇaṃ gambhīraṃ suppakāsitaṃ
phassayitvā¹⁸ viharāmi phaladānass' idaṃ phalaṃ.*

I dwell having attained that which is extremely difficult to see, extremely subtle, profound [and] well explained; this is the fruit of giving fruit.

*vimokkhe¹⁹ aṭṭha phusitvā²⁰ viharāmi anāsavo
ātāpī nipako cāhaṃ phaladānass' idaṃ phalaṃ.* (Ap 453.11–14)

After attaining the eight liberations, I dwell without taints, energetic and zealous; this is the fruit of giving fruit.

It seems a word play is intended in the two verses cited here, with the word *phala* being used to mean both “fruit” and “karmic result”. While somewhat ambiguous, it is reasonably likely that the four terms in *pādas* a and b of the first verse refer to *nibbāna*. For example, at S IV 369.13, 369.17 the terms “subtle” (*nipuṇa*) and “extremely difficult to see” (*sududdasa*) are used as adjectives of *nibbāna* (S IV 371.22). At Th 212 the same two terms describe a state (*pada*) which the commentary glosses as “*nibbāna*” (Th-a II 78.11). However there is no such ambiguity in the second verse, since the destruction of the taints is a common description of *nibbāna* (e.g. M I 522; S III 58). This verse clearly suggests that giving fruit to the appropriate recipients can result in the realisation of *nibbāna*.

The third passage to be examined belongs to a story which also begins in the wilderness. While searching for a spotted antelope, a deer hunter comes across a certain Anuruddha Buddha, whose name does not appear in the main canonical lists of past *buddhas*. The deer hunter makes a pavilion

¹⁸ E^c *passitvāna*.

¹⁹ E^c *vimokhe*.

²⁰ C^c *phassitvā*, E^c *passitvā*.

for Anuruddha Buddha, covers it with lotus flowers and then salutes him. Later he describes the fruits of his own actions:

*pubbenivāsaṃ jānāmi dibbacakkhu²¹ visodhitam
āsavā me parikkhānā buddhapūjāy'idaṃ phalaṃ.*

I know my previous abode[s], my divine eye has been purified, I have destroyed my taints; this is the fruit of [paying] homage to the Buddha.

*jahitā purimā jāti buddhassa oraso aham
dāyādo 'mhi ca saddhamme buddhapūjāy'idaṃ phalaṃ. (Ap 351.1–4)*

I have abandoned my previous family, I am a true son of the Buddha and I am an heir to the true doctrine; this is the fruit of [paying] homage to the Buddha.

In the first verse cited here, the protagonist indicates he has the triple knowledge (i.e. that he is a *tevijja*). These three knowledges are perhaps best known from the narration of Gotama Buddha's own awakening. At M I 247–249 the Buddha describes that on the night of his awakening he firstly remembered his former rebirths (the first knowledge), then perceived the rebirth of beings according to their past deeds by means of his purified divine eye (the second knowledge) and finally realised awakening after his mind was liberated from the taints (the third knowledge). That sequence is mirrored in this passage using essentially the same Pāli terms, however instead of being the culmination of a great deal of intensive spiritual practice, it is here declared to be simply the karmic result of paying homage to a past *buddha*.²²

The final passage belongs to a story which beings one morning 30,000 aeons ago at a hermitage situated near the Himalayas. Sumedha Buddha approaches for alms and the protagonist responds by filling Sumedha Buddha's bowl with ghee and oil. At the conclusion of the story he states:

²¹ E^c -*cakkhum*.

²² At Ap 351.10–11, the protagonist also adds that his awakening took place after hearing a talk from Gotama Buddha, implying that this was also a contributing factor.

*vatthaṃ gandhañ ca sappiñ ca aññaṃ ca*²³ *diṭṭhadhammikaṃ
asañkhatañ ca nibbānaṃ sappidānass' idaṃ phalaṃ.*

[Obtaining] clothing, perfume, ghee and other [items], and [realising] unconditioned *nibbāna* belonging to this life; this is the fruit of giving ghee.

*satipaṭṭhānasayano samādhijhānagocaro*²⁴
bojjaṅgabhojano ajja sappidānass' idaṃ phalaṃ. (Ap 343.17–20)

Today my bed is the applications of mindfulness, my pasture is concentration and meditative absorptions, my food is the factors of awakening; this is the fruit of giving ghee.

In the second verse cited here, the protagonist makes the rather startling claim that his expertise in meditation is simply the result of doing something as seemingly trivial as giving ghee to an appropriate recipient. It will be noticed that, unlike in the preceding passages cited from the Apadāna, the word *nibbāna* is explicitly used here, casually listed alongside the attainment of clothing, perfume and ghee.²⁵ Even the protagonist is surprised that such an immeasurable result could follow the donation of a little (*thoka*) ghee (Ap 343.9–10).²⁶

CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion we can draw from these passages relates to vocabulary. It may be useful to consider again the two pairs of ethical terms described at the beginning of this paper. What is meritorious and

²³ E° *vā*.

²⁴ E° *-jjhāna-*.

²⁵ At first inspection it seems incongruous that *nibbāna* is described as “unconditioned” (*asañkhata*) and yet apparently the causal result of a prior action. However this verse seems to imply it is the *realisation* of *nibbāna*, rather than *nibbāna* itself, that was caused by giving ghee, just as it seems to imply that *obtaining* clothing, etc., rather than the mere existence of clothing, etc., was caused by giving ghee. Certain post-canonical Pāli texts carefully spell out that the path does not cause the arising of *nibbāna*, which is after all unconditioned, but rather it causes the realisation of *nibbāna* (Collins 1998:184–185).

²⁶ A similar passage is found in the Sanskrit Avadānaśataka (Speyer 1902:329.10).

what is bad are terms typically employed in the canon to evaluate actions in terms of their results, often those results expected in a future rebirth. Perhaps partly because it consists of the end of rebirth, *nibbāna* is often discussed using a different set of language: what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. The key passages examined in this paper do not conform to this trend in that this distinction of vocabulary is no longer observed since *nibbāna* is unexpectedly described within the lexical framework of merit and *karma*. It might be said that the result is a rather less sophisticated description of the Buddhist path.

The second conclusion we can draw relates to doctrine. Firstly, in the Khuddakapāṭha passage it is stated that *nibbāna* may be gained by means of merit. This is rather unusual and may be contrasted with, for example, a passage narrating an unsuccessful attempt by Māra to distract the *bodhisatta* while he is meditating prior to his awakening, stating he should instead make merit. The *bodhisatta* replies, “I do not have use for even a little merit” (*aṇumattena pi puñṇena attho mayhaṃ na vijjati*, Sn 431).²⁷ This passage suggests that merit was irrelevant to Gotama Buddha’s realisation of *nibbāna*. Secondly, in the Apadāna passages it is stated that *nibbāna* may be the fruit of certain meritorious deeds. It is difficult to give a complete list of what is considered necessary and sufficient for the realisation of *nibbāna* according to early Pāli literature. At S IV 359–361 a number of practices are listed which lead to *nibbāna*, such as mindfulness directed to the body, calmness and insight, the eightfold path, etc. In narrative passages, we also find, for example, that descriptions of energetic practice in seclusion often immediately precede the realisation of *nibbāna* (e.g. S IV 76). In the case of these four Apadāna passages, the deeds considered to cause the attainment of *nibbāna* are giving to a *buddha*, or a *buddha* and his monastic order, and paying homage to a *buddha*. Besides a previously mentioned passage from the Vimānavatthu (Vv 81.24), I know of no other Pāli canonical text in which actions similar to these are considered sufficient to bring about the realisation of *nibbāna*, even if directed towards an excellent field of merit such as a *buddha*.

²⁷ See Norman (2006:239 note 431) for a well researched speculation on a possible earlier version of this passage.

This paper has been restricted to the canonical texts of just one Śrāvakayāna school. While the question of how this study relates to post-canonical Pāli literature and the works of other Buddhist schools is beyond the scope of this paper, these are important areas for future research. It is interesting that there are numerous descriptions of the realisation of awakening following the performance of rather simple meritorious deeds in early Sanskrit *avadāna* collections such as the *Avadānaśataka* (e.g. Speyer 1902:158–162) and the *Divyāvadāna* (e.g. Cowell & Neil 1886:72–74). Indeed, the themes and technical vocabulary of these texts share much in common with the *Apadāna* (Clark 2011) and it is possible that the apparent doctrinal developments found in the *Apadāna*²⁸ reflect broader social changes within early Indian Buddhism.

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²⁸ For some other odd features of the *Apadāna*, see Bechert (1992).

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